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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 004026

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: AK GOVERNMENT TIGHTENS THE SCREWS ON CORRUPTION

REF: A. 02 ANKARA 1927

[B.](#) ANKARA 3784

[C.](#) 02 ANKARA 7317

(U) Classified by Acting Political Counselor Nicholas S. Kass. Reason: 1.5 (b)(d).

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: AK Party is engaging in a broad and popular anti-corruption campaign for both normative policy and narrower, hardball political reasons. By doing so, P.M. Erdogan and AK are: 1) implicating both their political and bureaucratic rivals; thereby 2) putting them on the defensive and undercutting their ability to mount opposition to EU reform and other elements of the AK agenda; and in the process 3) deflecting criticism from long-standing corruption charges against Erdogan and other AK members. End summary.

[¶](#)2. (C) As noted in ref A, corruption in all its forms is deeply embedded in Turkish social, political, and bureaucratic life, although public attitudes are noticeably changing. Ongoing economic difficulties and the drive for EU membership have focused public opinion on the more subversive aspects of graft in politics but also, significantly, in the military -- long viewed as Turkey's most respected institution. Increased public criticism of endemic corruption helped paved the way for the ruling AK Party's victory in the November 2002 elections in part because AK was seen as cleaner than its electoral rivals.

The new offensive

[¶](#)3. (C) AK -- which means "clean" in Turkish -- made corruption a campaign theme but until now had done little on this front, given the pressing business of Iraq and other issues. With the war over, AK is refocusing on the issue. An AK-led Parliamentary investigative commission is probing the improprieties of previous governments, including those of Bulet Ecevit and Tansu Ciller.

-- Thus far, the commission has interviewed a host of senior politicians from the Ecevit administration, including then-Deputy P.M.s Mesut Yilmaz (long seen as up to his neck in corrupt business deals) and Ecevit's former right-hand man Husamettin Ozkan. It has also "invited" Ecevit himself to speak to the panel. While it remains to be seen whether the commission's efforts will bear fruit, its inquiries continue to make media headlines.

-- The commission is also interested in probing the proposed sale of AWACS aircraft to Turkey, including allegations that the price was "improperly inflated" and not fully accounted for on the books. (Note: Boeing and SSM officials tell us, however, that Parliament's decision to take a closer look at the deal is not new. They also insist the contract -- which recently entered into effect -- is not in jeopardy. End note.)

[¶](#)4. (C) Moreover, on June 12, Turkish authorities seized control of Cukurova Electricity and Kepez Electricity, both of which are owned by the notoriously corrupt Uzan family -- including Motorola deadbeat Cem Uzan, head of the Genc (Young) Party that is emerging as AK's most ardent challenger. As reported in ref B, the Uzans have allegedly: 1) used these companies to extort money and favors from local industries; 2) failed to comply with investment commitments and GOT regulations; and 3) misused its Imar Bank for nefarious financial purposes (septel).

Why Now

15. (C) This latest push comes against a backdrop of sustained popularity for P.M. Erdogan and the AK Party. It also comes amid a growing willingness -- even among more Establishment-oriented elements in the press and elsewhere -- to scrutinize defenders of the status quo, including the military, for their widely perceived resistance to comprehensive EU-related and other reforms. Clearly, AK recognizes the anti-corruption campaign as good policy and good politics.

-- AK members of Parliament's Defense Committee have recently expressed to us their determination to bring the budgeting process under more direct scrutiny and oversight, including a defense budget that heretofore has been subjected to virtually no civilian control. Kemal Kaya, a close adviser to NATO Parliamentary Assembly Chairman Vahit Erdem, offered to us the AK perspective on the corruption problem. "Whatever exists in society," he said, "exists in the military too." The goal, according to AK contacts, is aimed at nothing less than ending the military's dominance of political and social life in Turkey.

-- Uzan, the newest poster-boy for corruption, has lashed out publicly against P.M. Erdogan, calling him "merciless" and "godless" in a recent stump-speech in Bursa. Erdogan is now suing Uzan for defamation, and the Bursa Prosecutor's office has filed similar motions -- which, given Turkey's current restrictive speech regulations, could in theory land the Gencl leader in prison and ban him from politics.

Its All Relative?

16. (C) While AK makes the right noises, there are legitimate questions as to the extent it is in fact different from the other parties and players on the corruption issue. AK is generally regarded as far and above the rest of the crowd, a legacy in part of its Islamist roots and the widespread perception in Turkey that Islam-influenced politicians are therefore more moral and dedicated at least in some measure to a cause beyond themselves. On the other hand, as the party increasingly inclines toward the "mainstream," it has taken on some of the traits it criticizes in its mainstream rivals. While most observers seem willing for now to give AK on balance the benefit of the doubt, they do not automatically bestow upon it the mantle of (relative) personal probity that many conceded, however grudgingly, to former P.M. Erbakan, founder of the Refah-Fazilet-Saadet parties and godfather of Islamism in Turkey. While Erbakan's skirting of the law was generally chalked up to his movement-building enterprise, there is a whiff of simple pocket-lining surrounding both Erdogan and some of his associates from his days as Mayor of Istanbul. While venality is not a dominant theme associated with AK, it is present nonetheless in the commentaries of AK opponents in the press and elsewhere.

17. (C) Erdogan has long been accused of impropriety, beginning with mayoral tenure and more recently involving questionable relations with shady characters including failed bankers and other elements (ref c). While much of this reflects a failed effort by the State Establishment to discredit Erdogan and his party before the 2002 elections, the rumors persist -- with some justification. According to several Embassy contacts, AK officials in the bureaucracy have solicited bribes in return for their support for particular projects. As one leading businessman explained to us June 24, Turkey in 2003 is still dominated by the customary grant of favors and "gifts" to grease the wheels.

The Upper Hand

18. (C) Despite such charges, the anti-corruption campaign serves both AK's normative and narrower, hardball political interests by: 1) offering a public demonstration that AK is living up to its billing; 2) providing a convenient club with which to subdue the Government's rivals and challengers -- including the TGS and Uzan; and 3) deflecting criticism from long-standing charges against Erdogan and others. Cuneyt Ulsever, "Hurriyet" columnist and a leading critic of both the Establishment and AK, explained to us June 20 that "Erdogan is basically challenging the Establishment" to show its cards, which Ulsever thought required a certain element

of intestinal fortitude on the part of the P.M. In Ulsever's view, AK's jiu-jitsu tactics make charges against Erdogan-the-corruption-fighter appear even more like an Establishment put-up job.

PEARSON